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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the characteristics of teachers and their roles at Celebration School, an elementary/secondary school in which the high profile, innovative curriculum, team structure, guiding principles of learner-centered instruction, and high expectations for students create a demanding environment for teachers. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 10 teachers, 2 administrators, 4 parents, and 6 students. Themes related to the roles and demands of Celebration teachers were identified. Working in teams was the first theme identified. All teachers and administrators discussed the importance of the dynamics of teaching teams. A second major theme was that of the rewards and frustrations of the school's approach and the learner-centered environment. The relationships of teachers and parents was a third theme consistently identified. Celebration School faces many challenges in initiating and maintaining its reforms, especially in the number of simultaneous innovations, the team and open space structure, and the high profile these efforts have generated. Faculty members are sometimes frustrated by the demands placed on them, and it is essential that Celebration find ways to support the teachers and to communicate the school's mission to parents. (SLD)

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running head: THE UNIQUE ROLE OF CELEBRATION SCHOOL TEACHERS

The Unique Role of Celebration School Teachers

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Paper presented at the 1999 Annual Meeting of the

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Creating a setting is one man's most absorbing experiences, compounded as it is of dreams, hopes, effort and thought.

— Seymour Sarason

Introduction

Reform activities are widespread in the United States. Zelmelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1993) report that, "since the mid-1980s, we have been enjoying the most intense period of educational reform in this century." Yet the problems that reform initiatives are designed to address seem to persist and even grow. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) math standards show appropriate approaches to help students construct an understanding of mathematics, yet the memorization of algorithms persist. NSF systemic reform initiatives spread hands-on minds-on science resources and preparation to teachers around the country, yet traditional text sales soar. Whole language approaches including writers' workshop and meaning-based language arts are widely promoted, yet our children continue to come home with spelling lists to memorize. Innovations are difficult to implement and even harder to maintain.

Leadership has been identified as a key element in successful reform. Heller and Firestone (1995) report six important leadership functions: 1) providing and selling a vision, 2) obtaining resources, 3) providing encouragement and recognition, 4) adapting standard operating procedures, 5) monitoring the improvement effort, and 6) handling disturbances. Implementing innovation obviously requires a strong commitment of resources, time, and energy.

Slaton, Atwood, Shake, and Hales (1997), in a study about the reforms of the Kentucky educational system, report teachers' concerns about the hard work and change involved with educational change. They report that the need for significant individual and team planning time is critical. The open space/team teaching structure of many schools in the 1970s resulted in studies about team teaching. The data from these studies highlights the demands of team teaching.

Martin and Pavan (1976) report the results of a number of studies on team teaching, indicating positive yet modest benefits for children and some difficulties for the teachers resulting from "personality classes, the inability of most teachers to integrate their material, and a lack of planning time" (Engman, 1973). In addition, findings cited reported that "preparation is a vital component of effective teams" (Deibel, 1971; Funaro, 1969; Glaskell & Sheridan, 1968; Traut, 1971) and that "successful teams have worked together to develop their own programs" (Davis, 1996; Engman, 1970; Funaro, 1969; Olsen, 1968).

Martin (1975) adds an additional perspective to the difficulties of a team structure in an open space school. However, the open and mixed plan schools add an important dimension to teacher-teacher interaction. This dimension is the presence of other teachers in the same school area because each performs activities associated with the teaching process. In an open plan, a team of three, four, or five teachers may work with ninety or more students. All teachers and students may be simultaneously visible to each other. The fact that teachers are visible and often audible to each other and to a larger number of students than is found in the ordinary classroom situations may influence both teacher-teacher interactions and teacher-student interactions. Assigning teachers who are used to exercising a fair degree of authority and in many respects

autonomy within the classroom to a team teaching situation may uproot the nature of the social interaction which takes place in the school organization.

Thornton (1990) adds to the notion that team-teaching has challenges reporting that it is difficult and requires successful merging of personalities, teaching styles, and philosophies and demands communication and trust.

Young (1997) documents the importance of faculty relationships with parents when implementing innovations in education. She points out the influence of parents in determining a school's direction.

Perhaps the stickiest problem with educational reform is the parents of today's school children. Many school systems seem to be operating in a political black-hole in which we make policy or curriculum. Small groups of parents have in some cases been able to single handedly change curriculum because they brought pressure. In our attempt to please everyone all of the time, we have watered the school system that it no longer seems to stand for anything.

Meier discusses the tendency for innovation to regress towards the mean, become more traditional. "These one-of-a-kind schools flicker brightly. A few manage to survive by avoiding the public's attention or by serving powerful constituents: the rest gradually burn out" (1998). There is some irony in this notion—that extremely innovative schools, which often are intended to serve as models, seem more likely to survive and remain innovative with less public attention.

Celebration School's high profile, innovative curriculum, team structure, guiding principles, and high expectations create a demanding environment for teachers. In sum, this paper explores the teachers and their roles at Celebration School. Three major themes are addressed: 1)

working in teacher teams, 2) teacher's rewards and frustrations, and 3) teacher's relationships with parents.

Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers (three upper and seven lower), two administrators, four parents, and six students. In a semi-structured interview, each question or topic is addressed, yet the interviewer responds to what the participant is saying and is free to deviate from the questions by exploring topics which emerge during interview sessions. Interpretive research methods were used. Interpretive research, or qualitative research, is designed to create data that are descriptive, contextual, and insightful from a variety of perspectives.

Participants were selected with the intent of gaining insights and thoughtful reflections from a number of perspectives. There was no attempt to make random selections of teachers. Rather, as is consistent with interpretive research methodology, participants from different stakeholder groups were selected in order to receive open, honest, and insightful contributions from multiple perspectives. The assumptions underlying this evaluation of the role of teachers at Celebration School is that there is no one correct interpretation of issues and concerns. Insight comes through the variety of perspectives of the stakeholders in the school. It is our intent to present a "negotiated" understanding (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) from the 22 people interviewed, from personal observations, and from discussions with other research team members. However, the primary data source was the 12 interviews with teachers and administrators.

These 12 faculty and administrative semi-structured interviews included the following

topics:

1. Focus of an evaluation report.–Participants were asked to describe what they feel would be important to include in an evaluation report about Celebration School..

2. Curriculum.–Participants were asked to describe how curricular decisions are made.

3. Students' perceived efficacy related to their own learning.–Participants were asked to describe issues relating to how well students are aware of what they are learning.

4. Struggles and rewards of being a Celebration teacher.–Participants were asked to describe what it takes to succeed as a Celebration teacher.

Data generated from these interviews were also used to supplement data sources in other research inquiries by the research team.. All interviews were transcribed. Themes related to the roles and demands of Celebration teachers were identified and segments of text were coded appropriately. The analysis proceeded through a hermeneutic (interpretive) cycle — revisiting and discussing the themes and rereading the interviews. This process began onsite. As interviews proceeded, ideas that emerged in one interview were often discussed in later interviews. It continued with reading and re-reading of transcripts. Themes were identified and discussed with the members of the research team and then transcripts were re-read.

Theme 1: Working in Teams

All teachers and administrators interviewed discussed the importance of the dynamics of the teaching teams. The quality of the team has significant implications for the school day and for the students in that neighborhood. Implementation of many of the principles of Celebration School, because of the neighborhood structure, requires collaborative planning and decision

making. The dynamics of the team influences the teachers' ability to implement thematic project-based learning, integrate multiple intelligence theory throughout the school day, and create multi-aged learning opportunities. Some teachers repeatedly referred to their teams when asked about important aspects of their jobs at Celebration. Comments such as, "I am so lucky I have a great team," were common, as were words such as "lucky" and "fortunate." Teachers who said that their teams "clicked" and worked well together emphasized how important that was to them. Others reported that they had put much effort into the working relationships with their colleagues. There seems to be a predictable range of how well the teams functioned — from working together extremely well from the start with no perceivable problems, to working out initial and subsequent problems, to splitting into factions or losing some teachers due to unsolved problems.

There were several functional strategies that teams employed to help improve their ability to work together. These include weekly meetings off campus, supporting each other to go home by 5:00, and learning to be open and direct with each other when necessary. Each team developed its own culture and the members implemented strategies to help their group work together. Effective communication was at the center of most of these strategies. Teachers reported improvement in communication as a primary factor in improving their teams' dynamics.

An interesting outcome of the team structure is a unique combination of collaborative planning within each teams while significant isolation exists between teams. The level of collaborative planning within each team is, by the nature of the four-member team structure, extremely high. At the same time, the teachers reported having little knowledge of what was happening in other neighborhoods. Thus, the demands of working collaboratively in each team

made it more difficult to find time to facilitate inter-team or school-wide collaborations.

One of the school's stated principles is that learning is a partnership. This principle is clearly reflected in the school's creating and implementing a structure for partnerships by requiring teachers to work in a collaborative environment. Teachers reported that, early in the school year, they learned each others' strengths and weaknesses. Members of the successful teams complemented each others' expertise, and the students benefitted because the teams were able to capitalize on each member's strengths. The potential to model collaboration for students and to benefit from the rich interactions possible in group planning was evident in some of the neighborhoods.

The quality of the school day, to a large degree, is dependent on the team members' abilities to work together, to "check their egos at the door," to work through problems, and to grow into a functional supportive unit. Many of teachers at Celebration were highly regarded at their previous schools. Some teachers made the adjustment to their new school and "wouldn't want to be anywhere else." Others, for a variety of reasons unrelated to their competence as teachers, found working as part of an instructional team difficult. One teacher, for example, described the success of her team as a function of the members' learning to accept and build upon each others' strengths. This teacher stated that team members believed that it was okay that one of the team members was not very organized because, as she said, other team members "pull from your other strengths." The team became functional as a result of setting time aside for communication, of accepting strengths and weaknesses, and of learning to give and receive open, honest and direct feedback.

A teacher in another team described their success through the metaphor of being sisters. They trust and like each other, but can also say what's on their mind. She also emphasized the need for open communication. Developing and maintaining open and honest communication was identified as an important element for successfully functioning teams. It is clear that a challenge at Celebration School is to find the appropriate matches and good support (time and skill) to facilitate the continued growth of effective communications in each team.

It is understandable and expected that teams will experience some challenges. The way that these issues are anticipated and addressed will have a significant impact on the school's future. Team building can be formalized as part of the structure of the school. Examples include teachers being educated in conflict resolution, attending team/leadership activities (e.g., Outward Bound-style retreats), and including faculty in the hiring process. A couple of teachers expressed a desire that administrators visit more often in their neighborhoods in order to work with their teams more. Other members of the research team also received this recommendation from several teachers during informal conversations. The teams are clearly a crucial factor in the success of the school. All efforts to support the needs of the teams, from release time to facilitating conflicts to encouraging inter-team communication, should be considered a priority.

Theme 2: Rewards and Frustrations

Teachers discussed their year at Celebration with a great deal of passion. Many teachers stated that they wouldn't want to be anywhere else--that they are finally at a school where innovative, learner-centered teaching approaches are expected school-wide. They often reported conflicting but strong emotions about what it means to be a teacher at Celebration. Many of the

positive feelings that teachers have are centered around a feeling that they can teach in a way that they believe is developmentally appropriate for their students. One teacher explains it in the following way:

> I've taught in a traditional school before. Traditional in its architecture. But, I have taught the same way. My challenges there was how to find the space and the ability to coordinate schedules to allow me to teach the way that I felt like I wanted to--to reach a kid. We have the absolute best environment for that here, but we need to progress toward, I believe, more integration of all the children in all of the different areas, like in communication, in reasoning and problem solving, where we're including more of the children in terms of the spread of the age group and we're taking advantage of the integration to best use our time during school day.

Comments reflecting that teachers really appreciate being at Celebration are common:

- "I can't see myself anywhere else right now. This is where I want to be. I, as a teacher, have a lot to learn and every day is a learning experience because you don't know what you're going to encounter."
- "I've been looking for this all my life. . . . I always thought outside the box and was never comfortable in any of the other settings I was in."

While indicating their pleasure at being at Celebration School, some teachers also reported feeling that they were not being as successful as they had been before coming to Celebration. In the complex setting of their classrooms (team teaching, multi-age grouping, problem-based learning, innovative assessment, and integrating technology) teachers seemed to lose sight, at least to some

degree, of their accomplishments. The following comment was not unusual:

> "We feel like what we're doing for kids is good and we've always done that but we feel like, maybe as far as the planning that we do for our kids — isn't where it has been for us in the past."

Another teacher shared feelings of frustration.

> "Three weeks ago I would have thought I'm gonna quit. . . . I haven't been successful this year, I'm quitting because I'm working god awful hours, I have no social life to speak of because I'm always at the school, and I'm not even being successful at it. What's the point? And then I have all these parents and kids coming to me going, 'You're the best science teacher I've ever had.'. . . I was shocked at what I was hearing. I had one parent who came up to me just the other day and said, 'Well, sorry to hear that you're going and best of luck in all things.' I said, 'Well maybe you haven't heard. I'm coming back.' "

The teachers share a complicated and sometimes contradictory mix of perceptions of struggling with school reform to be all that they can be as teachers and great joy and satisfaction at being part of this unique educational endeavor.

All teachers who were interviewed spoke very highly about each other. They see themselves as a high-achieving, hard-working faculty. They referred to themselves and each other as curious, as readers, and as inquirers. There was an unusually high amount of respect for each other displayed among the faculty.

Celebration has succeeded in attracting an extremely dedicated faculty. They exhibit dedication for teaching in all areas of their work. Most teachers told us tales of long hours,

personal sacrifice, and great passion for Celebration. We witnessed many teachers smiling broadly as they discussed the accomplishments of their students. These teachers truly care about their students and relish helping them become independent learners. For example, one teacher commented on how, on a typical day, he stays late at school, goes home to spend some time with his family, and then stays up late into the night planning.

As teachers who were interviewed discussed the rewards and challenges of teaching at Celebration, one value came through consistently. The most important issue for them is that they are there for the students, and ultimately the needs of the students take precedence over all other concerns. Teachers often directly stated this during interviews. They reported that in their decision-making process the ultimate test of what they have planned is whether this is going to be good for the students.

All the teachers who were interviewed presented themselves as reflective practitioners. They were thoughtful about what they do with their students and its impact on their intellectual and social development. They are constantly evaluating the curriculum and its structure for ways to refine and improve the day-to-day school experience for all students. They obviously think a great deal about the major reasons that they are teaching at Celebration School and the principles of teaching and learning that are central to the school.

Celebration is a complex environment in which to teach. Teachers must work well with their teams, orchestrate the learning experiences of a hundred children, and maintain the dedicated, learner-centered approach to teaching that attracted them to Celebration in the first place. Such a complex set of demands raises questions about the faculty resources needed to

teach in a way that truly meets the individual needs of all the students. The problem of attempting to do so many worthwhile things may be confounded by having one hundred children in a shared space. A teacher discussed this issue during an interview.

> I think that people, whoever the higher ups are, the decision makers, the powers that be—need to realize that educating kids is not simple math. They think because they want to keep a ratio of 25:1, that 100:4 is the same thing. And the math doesn't work like that. 25:1 does not equal 100:4 in a neighborhood when you're talking about educating kids. I can't remember who I was reading...[it said] problem-based learning, which is kind of the crux of what we do, is messy. You know. And so by its very nature it's going to be...it's going to require more.

It is quite clear from the prior statement that one teacher interacting with and teaching 25 children is not the same as four teachers as a team interacting with and teaching 100 children.

It is not surprising that these high-achieving teachers are less than completely satisfied with what they have accomplished during their first year. Their dissatisfaction appears to be a product of the demands of implementing project-based learning with 100 children while negotiating with three other teachers and implementing a rich technology program, cooperative groups, and working out the kinks of a new school. In addition, because of the high profile of Celebration School, teachers reported that they are aware that simple classroom decisions that might be ignored in another school are noticed and can even end up described in a national magazine or newspaper.

There is no doubt that there are unique demands and challenges for a Celebration School

teacher. During the interviews, a number of qualities required of a Celebration teacher to succeed were discussed and described by the teachers and administrators. These include the following:

1. Flexibility: This was repeated often by teachers and administrators. The nature of the team teaching environment requires teachers to constantly negotiate and be flexible with their planning and implementation.
2. Professionalism: The constant pressures of high expectations, working in a team, high visibility, and innovative teaching require teachers to be confident professionals.
3. Being a Learner: Teachers and administrators reported that the faculty is and needs to be a curious and inquisitive group who like to learn. They described themselves as readers and life-long learners, and as such, model life-long learning for their students.
4. Hard work and dedication: There was consistency among all teachers interviewed that the teachers put in long hours. They are dedicated and view teaching at Celebration as much more than a job. They care deeply about the school and the students with whom they work.
5. Being a team player: Teachers need to be willing to work well as a member of a team. The demands of being part of an effective four-person teaching team are not trivial. In fact they may be the most significant factor in a teacher's success at Celebration.

While some teachers perceive themselves as working harder and being less creative or

effective or appreciated than they were in previous settings, this perception appears to be more a reflection of the high professional standards they hold for themselves and their expectations that they should be able to reach all of those standards during the first year of their teaching at Celebration School. Even those who are highly critical of their own attainments would be considered to be highly effective teachers in any school in the country.

It is important to assess the support that is needed for teachers to succeed and to feel their success. There is no easy answer to helping teachers see how they are making a difference. Ultimately, if the school maintains its devotion to the guiding principles and directs resources to the implementation and evolution of that vision, teachers should understand better how to meet their own high standards effectively. We believe that the complexity of Celebration School, while promoting the science of "best practices," may, in some cases prevent teachers from exhibiting the levels of spontaneity that they are accustomed to being able to apply to the art of best practices. This, in some ways, brings us back to the issue of the teaching team. The creative elements of teaching must, to a large degree, come from the synergistic interaction of the team members.

Theme 3: Teachers' Relationships with Parents

Both the parent community and the teachers care deeply about providing the best possible educational experience for the students at the school. During our observations, we noted that there were a number of opportunities for parents to visit the school. While concerns were expressed, the central issue is that both groups want what is best for the students in the school. During interviews, parents, teachers, and administrators made it clear that they were very committed to the well-being of the students at Celebration School. There is no shortage of caring,

concerned, and involved adults in the lives of the students at Celebration School.

The community of Celebration results in a "high-powered" and highly involved parent body. One administrator admiringly described parents as "aggressive and passionate" about their children. Many parents are involved daily in the academic activities that support learning in the school. Many have moved to Celebration because of the school and, thus, have high expectations for their children and the school. The teachers feel enormous pressure to accommodate the parents' concerns while maintaining the vision of the school. On the other hand, many parents express confusion about what is happening at the school. They want to understand what is happening and to be reassured that their children are receiving the best education possible, within the unique nature of Celebration School.

The philosophy, theoretical base, and structure of Celebration School are not typical. Many parents are unfamiliar with aspects of Celebration School including the multi-age groupings, the project-based learning, the open space, the use of technology, and the assessment strategies. An administrator pointed out that even the names of things (such as the Kiva) have been confusing to some parents. This is further exacerbated by the evolving nature of the school. Because the school is still defining itself, it is more difficult to educate parents about the "Celebration School approach" than it will be after the school has a longer history.

Parents have varying degrees of understanding of the approaches used, and want reassurance that their children are getting the basics. It became clear in talking to parents and teachers that, while there are teachers who want to be "trusted to do their jobs," there also are parents who want reassurance from the teachers that their children are getting all the "basics" that

they need. Parental concerns about the level of student achievement has led, in some instances, to parents' seeking some form of supplemental instruction. For example, one family has hired an outside tutor to compensate for some perceived academic deficits of their child. While this action may not be typical, the concern it represents (that the children acquire the skills they need) is shared by a number of the parents. A major challenge for the administration is to help parents understand and even become partners in their children's education while supporting the teachers need for appropriate autonomy, professional decision making, and even the room to make mistakes as the school evolves.

As teachers and administrators attempt to respond to the concerns of parents, the challenge will be to keep from moving back to a more traditional form of teaching. It will be tempting to resolve perceived problems with the current school curriculum by adopting traditional accommodations, resulting in Celebration School's becoming more like the average or typical public school. That is, there may be a temptation to make the school more traditional to satisfy some concerns immediately, rather than continuing to find ways to improve upon the implementation of the school's vision.

Discussion

Celebration School faces the many challenges of initiating and maintaining reform. The number of simultaneous innovations, team and open space structure, and high profile contribute to the complex task of maintaining a direction and focus that is true to its original vision. As described earlier, teachers feel over-extended and, at times, frustrated. They are putting in long hours to work out the logistics of implementing a child-centered curriculum in a multi-aged team-

teaching context. A challenge for Celebration School will be to maintain the high energy and devotion of the faculty in a setting that makes more demands on teachers than in most schools.

It is understandable and expected that teams will experience some problems and challenges. The way that these issues are anticipated and addressed have a significant impact on a school's future. Team building is important to include in teacher preparation. Being educated in conflict resolution, attending team/leadership activities (e.g., Outward Bound-style retreats), and including faculty in the hiring process can promote effective team teaching. A couple of teachers expressed a desire that administrators visit more often in their neighborhoods in order to work with their teams more. The teams are clearly a crucial factor in the success of the school. All efforts to support the needs of the teams, from release time to facilitating conflicts to encouraging inter-team communication, should be considered a priority.

Our data supports the need to educate parents about the theory and practice of the innovative and unfamiliar educational approaches. Parents often need specific, concrete explanations related to what their own children are doing. For example, some parents, during an interview, expressed their concerns about the use of invented spelling. They seemed unaware of the teachers' role in promoting a developmentally appropriate progression from invented to standard spelling and how phonics is an integral part of the use of invented spelling. A simple explanation of how a child progresses to standard spelling and pointing out how phonics is naturally part of this approach reduced this couple's anxiety. Parents often need concrete explanations related to what their own children are doing.

Political pressure will continue to confront Celebration School's administration and faculty

at higher than normal levels. While these political concerns must be addressed, it is important to continue to base school policy and structure on the educational theory and practice on which the school is based. Interested stakeholders require continued education about a schools guiding principles so there can be active participants in supporting the school's continued growth and development in a positive direction. It is important to realize that parents are part of the team. Schools cannot work without the support and backing of parents. While teachers would like parents to trust them, and parents want to see what they expect in a good school (textbooks and spelling tests, for example). Neither are solutions that will work by themselves. Parents need to be welcome partners in the process.

It is important to assess the support that is needed for teachers to succeed and to feel their success. There is no easy answer to helping teachers see how they are making a difference. Ultimately, teachers have a need to know that they are successful in promoting growth and learning in their students while implementing the philosophy of the school. The complexity of Celebration School, while promoting the **science** of "best practice," may constrain teachers from exhibiting the levels of spontaneity they need to apply to the **art** of best practices. This, in some ways, brings us back to the issue of the teaching team. The creative elements of teaching must, to a large degree, come from the synergistic interaction of the team members.

It is important that Celebration continue to find the resources to meet the needs of the faculty and support them in implementing the extraordinary vision that makes Celebration a unique and demanding environment. The documentation of this process can provide a great service to the field by showing how Celebration School solves problems that are inherent in such

an innovative school and classroom structure.

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